

## VIRTUES, GIFTS AND TALENTS: PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC TRADITIONS

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In European intellectual history, gifts and talents have been a prominent topic of philosophical and theological reflection for more than 2000 years. In Aristotle, a gift is understood as something "given without recompense" (*Topics* 125a18). Gifts were thus distinguished from the economic exchange of buying and selling as well as from earning by means of human labor. The practice of giving and receiving gifts and favours was a very important social condition in Roman society, as the extensive treatise *De beneficiis* by the Stoic thinker Seneca shows. For Seneca, both the benefactor and the recipient of the gifts are under various moral obligations concerning the treatment of the gifts given and received.

Jesus and Paul

In religious traditions, in particular Christianity, we can observe how the discourse on gifts became internalized and applied not only to material things and social benefits, but also to mental faculties and human skills. Jesus' parable on talents which the master gives to his servants in order that they may increase their value (*Matt* 25) takes the material world as its point of departure. It is rather easy, however, to interpret the parable so that it refers to the different individual skills and gifts possessed by different people. A talent, be it a material commodity or a mental skill, needs to be nurtured and properly increased and circulated. Developing and circulating the gifts received is rewarding and morally laudable, whereas their neglect is a vice. In Jesus' parable, a modern interpreter easily sees the vice of idleness, but at least as important for many Christians was the vice of ingratitude, the lack of respect towards the giver of the gift. In hiding the talent in the ground, the bad servant does not receive and engage the gift properly. Thus he displays a lack of respect or ingratitude.

In the letters of Apostle Paul the topic of giving and receiving gifts becomes internalized and is transformed into the theological notion of charism. Charisms are gifts given by God. They are not a form of reciprocal exchange based on merits, gratitude or good expectations, but they are based on grace, *kharis*. Thus they aim at expressing a unilateral and free gift of God. The charisms express themselves as "fruits of the Spirit", that is, as attitudes, emotions, social and mental skills which resemble classical virtues, for instance as love, joy, patience, generosity and self-control (*Gal* 5:22). Paul speaks of spiritual gifts (*1 Cor* 12:1-11) which often pertain to different individuals in different fashion, although they manifest the same spirit. Interestingly, Paul's list of such gifts begins with the mental skills of wisdom and knowledge (*1 Cor* 12:8) which are given to some but not all people as a gift. Paul is not, however, advocating the intellectual charisms as the ultimate gifts, but he rather praises those charisms which belong to the social capital of bonding and bridging among different people. It is love that summarizes the gift of social capital (*1 Cor* 13).

Thomas Aquinas

The European academic vocabulary concerning virtues, gifts and talents was for centuries shaped by the classical work of the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas works out a synthesis of classical Greek philosophy, in particular Aristotle, and Christianity. With regard to human skills and talents, Aristotle was not altogether easy to reconcile with the tradition of Jesus and, in particular, Paul. For Aristotle

(in *Ethica Nicomachea* and *De anima*), human intellectual capacities and skills are above all virtues which emerge as a result of constant exercise and good educational training. Aristotle further holds that the soul is the formal cause of human nature. According to this view, all souls are similar and therefore lack positive individual differences.

Aquinas does not completely reconcile these discrepancies between the Aristotelian and Christian models of human soul. He rather constructs a complex hierarchy of virtues and gifts and their many-sided interplay. Both for Aristotle and Aquinas, virtues emerge as a result of exercise and learning. Unlike virtues, gifts are for Aquinas directly given or infused into us. Gifts are spirits which are "in us by divine inspiration". Inspiration is a motion coming from outside; thus it is the extrinsic principle of human movement. The virtues which emerge as a result of training form the human person as she is driven by her intrinsic principle, human reason. (*Summa theol.* II/1 q68 a1; Saarinen 2005, 127).

Without going deeper into the meaning of the terms "intrinsic" and "extrinsic", one can say that the term intrinsic refers to the inner grasp, rational human understanding and intellectual motivation. "Extrinsic" alludes to the powers which externally and materially move the person. Extrinsic causes can be described as a capacity or force, but also as the purpose and drive towards some goal. For instance, in this event of my lecturing to you, the intrinsic cause of my activity is that I have studied history, find it interesting and believe to understand it, whereas the extrinsic cause is that God, or perhaps evolution, has bestowed me with such capacities which enable me to understand historical texts and give me a sense of fulfilment or satisfaction in performing this task.

For Thomas Aquinas both the virtues and the gifts thus refer to the same thing in humans, namely human movement or activity, as its intrinsic and extrinsic disposition. Human activity, be it physical or intellectual, is both autonomous and heteronomous at the same time. The gifts highlight the heteronomous reality. At the same time they are, as dispositions, human properties which go together with the intrinsic, reason-based virtues. In this way Aquinas builds a gift-based theory of human activity on top of Aristotle's virtue-based view.

It is important to see in which precise sense the gifts are heteronomous. For Thomas, the talents are given through inspiration and they refer to the extrinsic principle of movement or activity. In concrete human action, however, gifts go together with the intrinsic and autonomous virtues. In this sense, the educational value of both virtues and gifts is similar: both dispose and prepare a person for the right conduct. In a concrete situation it is difficult to distinguish whether one acts in an excellent manner as a result of being gifted or as a result of hard work and exercise. Interestingly, however, the Thomistic discussion on virtues and gifts elaborates a clear conceptual distinction between achieved and non-achieved features of human conduct.

For those of us who are not so interested in theology or history it may be relevant to see that the theological discussion on charisms has in this manner worked out a basic distinction which may continue to be interesting, irrespective of its theological background. We may replace the phrase "God-given gift" or "inspired" by other phrases like "given by nature" or "evolutionary" and by so doing reaffirm the theoretically important distinction between achieved and non-achieved or between autonomous (learning and choosing) and heteronomous (genetic and environmental) aspects of human conduct.

## Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic educational thinking is largely based on the Thomistic interplay of virtues and gifts. Hard work and training are necessary in order that the virtues can emerge in

an Aristotelian manner. The intellectual virtue of understanding belongs essentially to this training, since human reason can be educated to know the intrinsic causes and thus learn autonomy and inner motivation. At the same time, it is also important to identify and nurture the gifts given to each individual. Through their various gifts people can develop their particular personality, but they also realize that their behavior is not only autonomous, but also extrinsic and heteronomous in the sense that given and non-achieved realities steer their activities.

One influential corollary of the Thomistic synthesis of virtues and gifts relates to the increased individualism in late medieval and early modern Europe. The idea of individual talents or inspiration pays significantly more attention to the differences among individual persons than the classical virtue ethics of Aristotle. In the Thomistic context it is possible to think that some few individuals were extraordinarily talented, in other words, that God has bestowed abundant spiritual gifts upon them. A particularly well-known example of this view concerns the investigation of saintly deeds and the appointment of saints in the Roman Catholic Church.

From the 16th century until today, special rules apply to the investigation of candidates to be appointed to the status of sainthood. A special criterion is that the saints should have displayed the so-called heroic virtue in their lifetime. The heroic virtue is, theologically, a special and extraordinary gift which God bestows on some exemplary Christians. With this extraordinary talent the saints are able to perform heroic actions which are beyond the reach of ordinary people. The extensive theoretical discussion of the spiritual talents of saints has led not only to the positive appreciation of human differences but also to the elaboration of theoretical criteria as well as to the empirical and documented measurement of individual human talents.

### The Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century gave new directions to this discussion. Since the Protestants taught that salvation was not due to our own works but to faith, they were often critical of Aristotelian virtue ethics and tended to regard it as a problematic self-righteousness. The idea of God-given gifts enjoyed a high respect among Protestants. God gives everything as a gift. We should therefore regard all our belongings, even our mental skills, as aspects of this total donation. Heteronomy and gift-language were thus emphasized while autonomy and virtue ethics became downplayed.

At the same time, the Protestant Reformation was an inherently complex phenomenon. Martin Luther and his companions advocated schools very strongly and invested greatly in the education of children and ordinary people. In practice, moral, intellectual and practical formation enjoyed a high popularity. Because the Reformation abolished the veneration of saints, the saints were no longer models for the display of God-given talents. According to Protestantism, all people are saints and can thus display special gifts in their earthly vocation. The educational thinking which emerged out of this complex phenomenon was a combination of old and new ideas, a new combination of the gifts and virtues.

The leading educationalist of the Reformation was Luther's colleague Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560). Let it be mentioned briefly that the Lutheran Reformer of Finland, Mikael Agricola, was Melanchthon's pupil in Wittenberg and that the founding of schools in Sweden and Finland followed Melanchthon's ideas. The same development occurred in many European countries in which Melanchthon's textbooks were read in the Protestant universities.

In his psychological and pedagogical writings, Melanchthon offers a moderated version of Luther's theological insights. In fact, he takes up terminology which was also present in Catholicism. Following Luther, he says that Aristotle's virtue ethics does not give a true picture of human activity. But the ideas of virtue, exercise and training of human reason can nevertheless be successfully applied in many less theological branches of human education.

Melanchthon's own theological picture of human nature proceeds from the idea that human knowledge is based on the so-called natural notions, a set of fundamental ideas regarding human reason, self-consciousness, moral truths and also the existence of God. Theologically, the natural notions are remnants of the idea of the person as being made in the image of God. They are thus part of the givenness of man as a created being and in that sense gifts. In our world, these gifts appear as lights which enlighten the search for reason in its formation. Thus, although human reason in many ways operates in accordance with Aristotelian philosophy, it is fundamentally dependent on the natural light given from above as divine gift. At this fundamental level, Melanchthon's educational and ethical thinking emphasises the necessity of gifts even more strongly than Thomas Aquinas's view.

Although the Protestant Reformation abolished the veneration of saints, the underlying topic of extraordinary individual talents remains a much-discussed topic in Protestantism. Melanchthon is keenly interested in the topic of heroic virtue. For him it is not connected with saints but with those people upon whom God has bestowed spiritual gifts in an extraordinarily generous manner. Some gifted people excel in courageous deeds, others in the life of faith. But there are also heroic talents in arts and sciences, like Josquin des Prez in music, Ovid in poetry and Archimedes in mathematics. Their talents are natural notions and movements which have been given by God as special inspiration (Melanchthon 1893, 15-16).

### The Heroic Virtue

In his description of highest artistic and intellectual virtues Melanchthon follows models found in late medieval and Renaissance philosophy. But he is original in the great and systematic emphasis which he gives on different sorts of individual talents. In his psychology Melanchthon stresses the so-called inventive power of the human mind, a special faculty which is operative in sciences and arts when discoveries are made and creative work realized. The inventive power is God's gift which is distributed among humans in an unequal manner so that some people are more innovative or creative than others (Melanchthon 1961, 337-339). Because of this psychological doctrine, individual differences and capacities also play a significant role in educational considerations.

We may perhaps say that the Protestant Reformation in a way secularised and democratised the discussion on saints and their extraordinary gifts. Protestant academic textbooks became more interested in the extraordinary talents of other classes of people, like extraordinary rulers, artists and intellectuals. Lutheran ethical textbooks of the 16th and 17th centuries often contain long lists of individual people who have excelled in warfare, religion, arts and sciences (Saarinen 1990). These works prepare for the emergence of the idea of genius in the Enlightenment. They also contain a more or less standard set of questions related to individual talent, for instance regarding the issue of whether or not women can display heroic virtues.

We may trace this development from the early dissertations of the University of Helsinki, founded in 1640. One of the first dissertations of our university, *De virtute heroica* by Johan Wassenius from the year 1648, asks this very question concerning the possibility of extraordinary talents in women. Employing Melanchthon and other early Protestant thinkers,

Wassenius answers as follows:

Both in earlier times and in our days many women have been examples of heroic virtue. Those include Judith, Semiramis, Jael, ... Margareta of Denmark and Elisabeth of England. And nobody can deny that our own country has also produced amazonic heroic virtues. A living example is provided in our excellent and powerful Queen Christina, from whom the heroic virtue radiates into the whole world. (Wassenius 1648, n.p., my translation)

Although Wassenius certainly has political reasons to praise Christina, the founder of the Finnish university, it is also well known that Christina was exceptionally learned and did not only set an example of talent as a monarch, but also and perhaps predominantly as a woman of letters and an intellectual. She was thus also an example of extraordinary intellectual talent. In spite of their stress on education, all Protestant writers underlined that the heroic virtue is always given from above as a spiritual gift.

### Autonomy and Heteronomy

From our contemporary perspective, it may seem somewhat odd that the creative capacity of the talented individual is in major Christian traditions not regarded as being a fruit of one's autonomous self. It is rather the expression of a gift bestowed upon the person by another agent, namely God. In this observation we meet a fundamental ambivalence which is inherent in concepts like "gift" and "inspiration". On the one hand, these concepts depict the very individuality of a certain person because they identify such traits of character which are not universal but distinguish the person from the larger group. In this way they are identity-constituting concepts.

On the other hand, the description of a certain trait as gift or as inspiration expresses a heteronomy, namely the issue that someone else, a giver or a spirit, has donated the talent under discussion. In this second sense the concepts of gift and inspiration detach the person from this specific trait of character and ascribe it to another subject. Thus the concept of gift also tends to reduce a person's identity. One may wonder whether this twofold phenomenon expresses a merely historical ambivalence.

Today's scientists probably say that they do not postulate a God or any other external giver who or which would in some way represent another subject or an extrinsic foundation of heteronomy. Today's scientists are only measuring certain abilities and in any case they do not postulate more than one carrier of these abilities within a person. On the other hand, at least a layperson is tempted to think that the following example could be plausible. Let there be two groups of schoolchildren who come from similar surroundings and have received a similar training in mathematics. But the first group is significantly better in maths than the second one. Could it not be that the first group has some kind of "talent" which cannot be traced to their intrinsically conscious mind but is rather due to some kind of "given" ability?

Continuing this line of thought, one may argue that, at least in some circles of genetic and brain research, people employ words like "genes", "evolutionary outcome" or "brain capacity" in the same way as Paul and Aquinas use the phrase "spiritual gifts", namely, as a quasi-explanation of some rather mysterious differences among individuals. In all these words and phrases, the subject in question is not autonomously in control of the properties which he or she possesses.

### The Paradox of Free Gifts

This remark leads me to my second area of interest, which is the theoretical discussion on the gift in contemporary philosophy and sociology. Although this area is closely linked to the history of gifts and virtues in the Western tradition, it is a distinct philosophical topic and as such perhaps less theological than the first one.

Many sociologists of the 20th century like to argue that there is no such thing as free lunch. Every gift is conditioned by some reciprocity and thus there is no real reason to speak of unilateral or free gifts. Bourdieu, for instance, defines gifts as exchanges in which the recipient after some delay gives back something different. During the last twenty years, this view has been challenged by other thinkers, like Jacques Godbout (1999), who argues that genuine gifts may be possible and distinguishable from economic exchange. At the same time he is ready to admit, however, that the notion of free gift contains many conceptual problems.

I will reflect on this discussion, because the point has often been made in it that all language based on the notion of gift, if only metaphorically, runs the risk of becoming self-contradictory. Thus even other concepts which employ the idea of gift, for instance forgiveness or altruism, may lead in complications. Could it be that the discussion on talents is also hampered by these complications? In order to address this question, some description of the philosophy of gifts is necessary.

The basic problem with ordinary free gifts is that, as soon as the recipient knows the item to be a free gift, he or she feels indebted and pays back at least a sense of gratitude. But a free gift should not involve any indebtedness or gratitude since it is supposed to be unilateral. Therefore, already the identification of a gift as gift in a way destroys the gift. This semantic problem was already observed by Seneca and Thomas Aquinas who admitted that a gift is not merely unilateral but entails a proper amount of gratitude. But then someone may claim that the phenomenon of gift is inevitably reduced to the business of buying and selling gratitude. Therefore, genuine gifts are impossible.

One strategy of solving this problem, applied by many philosophers, is to detach the giver from the gift. A genuine gift needs to be anonymous, that is, the recipient must not know who the giver is. Some philosophers add that even the giver needs to give in such a manner that he never comes to know the recipient. Donating blood would be an example of a genuine gift in these two senses. If I receive a blood transfusion, I may be grateful for this precious gift. But there is no interpersonal indebtedness towards anybody and, in this sense, the gift is freely given and received.

### The Paradox of Being Gifted

Perhaps this example bears some resemblance to our discussion of talents and high abilities. A talented person may feel gratitude for her talent without being indebted in any way. There is no personal benefactor towards whom she should show respect because of the talent inherent in her. She has received her talent, metaphorically speaking, from an anonymous donor.

I have not seen anywhere in literature the discussion on free gifts having been applied to the phenomenon of talents and giftedness. It may nevertheless be fruitful to think about possible analogies and applications. It may be the case that the above-mentioned ambivalence between heteronomy and autonomy, or the issue of a tacitly presupposed quasi-giver, are related to the conceptual paradoxes of free gifts (For the following, cf. Saarinen 2005, 126-131).

The phrase "being gifted" is many-sided and complex. When teachers or other people say today that somebody is gifted, they do not mean that the talents in question would have

literally come from some external source or giver. On the contrary, the phrase is often employed in order to say the opposite, that somebody is inherently bright, that he or she possesses some valuable properties from the beginning. The gift has not been given by the teacher, but it is already there when the school begins its work. A talent needs education and nurture, but we do not normally think that the notion of talents involves a transfer of something to an ordinary person so that the person from a certain point on can be called "gifted". On the contrary, when we say that this child is gifted, we mean that the child possesses something from the beginning and therefore does not need as much teacher-given training as other children. Being gifted is presented as an autonomous or inherent feature of the person.

While the phenomenon of being gifted in this way downplays the aspect of an external giver, it highlights another aspect of the classical gift at the same time. A gift is neither earned through hard work, nor is it a reward for your activity. A gift comes to you, or exists in you, as a free gift. A child who, without training, learns to read at the age of four is gifted in this sense. The child possesses a gift which allows for rapid development of new skills. This gift may be of genetic or biological origin, but it is not achieved. The child simply has it.

This second aspect of "being gifted" resembles some classical features of the theological gift. If the first aspect showed a certain autonomy of being gifted, the second aspect displays a heteronomy. The gift in question is now heteronomous in the sense that we cannot control and manipulate it. It is not of our doing that this child is so clever. It would also be strange to say that the child himself or herself has caused this state of affairs. The child in question enjoys these high abilities without much subjective effort. The gifts are thus, in some metaphorical sense, "put into" the child by some external but anonymous giver, and in this metaphorical sense they are heteronomous.

Our contemporary way of speaking about "being gifted" thus employs a dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy. This dialectic resembles, but is not identical with, the paradoxes of the so-called free gift. A gifted person has received a gift which, by definition, is not his or her own achievement but something for which he or she perhaps should feel indebted or at least grateful. At the same time, the state of being gifted is an inherent feature and autonomous resource of this person. The historical discussion, in spite of Christian heteronomy, also emphasizes autonomy. Seneca stresses that the recipient of the gift should not feel too much indebted or too grateful but should embrace the gift as his property without hesitation. In Jesus' parable of the talents, the man who hid the talent in the ground disregarded the autonomous ownership. But this lack of autonomous engagement was considered to be a vice.

In both historical cases, exaggerated heteronomy and alienation from the gift are criticized. What is attempted is a balanced paradox or dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy. Maybe such a balanced dialectic would also be fruitful in the understanding and nurture of the phenomenon of high ability.

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